

Forty years ago today I was born in Greenville, South Carolina. Just four days earlier, on March 7, 1965, Bloody Sunday took place as Congressman John Lewis and others attempted to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge for voting rights and were beaten by state troopers in Selma, Alabama.

On March 9, angry white men beat a white Unitarian minister and voting rights activist from Boston, Reverend James Reeb, about the head with a baseball bat. He died on the day I was born.

My father arrived in Selma with other students from the Chicago Theological Seminary on Wednesday, March 10. He had sent my pregnant mother to Greenville to be with his mother for my birth. He called Greenville from a highway pay phone on March 11 after being chased out of Selma by local police and was told of my birth. He was so excited about these two momentous events that he wanted to name me Selma. Thank God for my mother's better judgment.

The march from Selma to Montgomery began on Sunday, March 21 and ended on March 25. While transporting marchers back to Selma, a Detroit housewife and mother of five, Viola Liuzzo, was shot to death on Highway 80.

These events shocked the nation, and mobilized Congress to pass and President Johnson to sign the 1965 Voting Rights Act on August 6, 1965. Technically, this law was the implementing legislation for the 15th Amendment, ratified 95 years earlier in 1870. The 15th Amendment outlawed *discrimination in voting* on the basis of race, but didn't give *all* Americans an affirmative *citizenship right* to vote. In essence, then, non-discrimination in voting was my *birthright*, but voting is still not my *citizenship right*. A citizenship right to vote for all Americans still lies in the future.

The events in Florida in 2000 and in Ohio in 2004 during the last two presidential campaigns have put a lot of focus on our dysfunctional voting system. There are many voting issues before Congress and each needs to be separated out so that each is properly understood.

Extending the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA). This is of immediate importance! Most of the law is permanent, and certain sections were extended and strengthened in 1970, 1975 and 1982, the last time for 25 years. Thus, it comes up for review again in 2007. In a recent CBC meeting with President Bush I asked him if we could count on his support. Despite the fact that he was a two-term Governor of Texas, which is specifically covered by the VRA, he said he didn't know anything about it and would only deal with it when it came to his desk. Those who are interested in voting rights must keep a very close eye on developments surrounding extending the 1965 VRA because I believe conservatives - mainly Republicans, but also some Democrats - will try to weaken it.

Voting Reform Legislation. The voting problems highlighted in Florida and Ohio are rampant throughout most of the U.S. Congressman John Conyers and Senator Christopher Dodd have introduced voting reform legislation in their respective bodies to correct many of these problems, building on the previous Motor Voter and Help American Vote Acts. I'm drafting an even more comprehensive omnibus bill for additional voter reform.

Putting the Right to Vote in the Constitution. The 15th, 19th and 26th Amendments are written to outlaw voter discrimination on the basis of race, sex and age respectively. I have proposed legislation - House Joint Resolution 28 - that would add an affirmative individual right to vote to the Constitution and give Congress the power to create a unitary voting system through appropriate legislation.

Why do we have so many problems nation-wide? Because our current system is built on the sand of "states' rights." There are approximately 12,000 election jurisdictions in the U.S., and they are all "separate and unequal." How do you get equal access and equal protection under the law with respect to voting with such a system? You don't and you can't!

There were 54 original co-sponsors when I introduced H.J. Res. 28 last week, and three more co-sponsors have been added for a current total of 57.

There's going to be a lot of focus in Congress in the next several years on voting. It's extremely important to extend the 1965 Voting Rights Act, to get voting reform legislation passed and to continue to build support for adding a Voting Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It's equally important to know the difference between them and fight for all of them.